

6. Speech Communities

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Speech Communities

- In this chapter, we come across some terms that do not have clear definitions, and which are used more as a matter of convenience than as a scientific reality.
- What is a *speech community*?

We would expect [...] that certain individuals would behave like other individuals: they may be said to speak the same dialect or the same variety [...] and in that respect to be members of the same *speech community*.

Our sociolinguistic world is not organized in terms of objective “speech communities” [...] This means that the search for a “true” definition of the speech community, or for the “true” boundaries around some speech community, is just a wild goose chase (Hudson 1996: 29)

- What is a *group*?

For our purposes, a group must have at least two members but there is really no upper limit to group membership. People can group together for one or more reasons. [...] The group may be temporary or quasi-permanent and the purposes of its members may change, i.e., its *raison d'être*. A group is also more than its members for they may come and go. They may also belong to other groups and may or may not meet face-to-face.

Speech Communities

- Researchers have different definitions of what constitutes a *speech community*.
- Many agree that a speech community is not defined as people who all speak the same code, but by “participation in a set of shared norms” – people who have the same linguistic values. (Remember our discussion of *beliefs* a few weeks ago.)

Thus, all New York speakers from the highest to lowest status are said to constitute a single speech community because, for example, they agree in viewing presence of post vocalic [r] as prestigious. They also agree on the social value of a large number of other linguistic elements. Southern British English speakers cannot be said to belong to the same speech community as New Yorkers, since they do not attach the same social meanings to, for example, (r): on the contrary, the highest prestige accent in Southern England (RP) is non-rhotic. Yet, the Southern British speech community may be said to be united by a common evaluation of the variable (h); *h*-dropping is stigmatized in Southern England . . . but is irrelevant in New York City or, for that matter, in Glasgow or Belfast.

Groups & Individuals

- Groups are made up of unique people.
- People each have their own individual identities in addition to being part of one or several groups.
- Assuming that an individual will always behave in line with the group is to believe in a *stereotype*. Stereotypes ought to be avoided, as they are ethically problematic and scientifically invalid.
- Most people are members of multiple groups, and of multiple speech communities.
- No speech community is entirely uniform in belief or practice, since it's made up of individuals who each vary in different ways.

This is a recurring problem when assigning individuals (people, animals, things, etc.) into discrete groups. Where are the borders?

What makes a sandwich a sandwich?

Which of the following are sandwiches?



Speech Communities & Groups

‘Group’ is therefore a relative concept and ‘speech community’ must also be relative. You are a member of one speech community by virtue of the fact that on a particular occasion you identify with X rather than Y when apparently X and Y contrast in a single dimension. [...] An individual therefore belongs to various speech communities at the same time, but on any particular occasion will identify with only one of them, the particular identification depending on what is especially important or contrastive in the circumstances.

- So if you’re a New Yorker, but your family says a word differently than other New Yorkers, when discussing that word, you’d identify with the speech community of your family.
- But when talking about how you say ‘soda’ instead of ‘pop,’ in line with other New Yorkers, you’re identifying with the New York speech community, in contrast to, e.g., the Midwest speech community.

Discussion! (p. 125, q. 5)

In what respects does the language which is characteristic of each of the following groups, if there is such a characteristic language, mark each group off as a separate speech community?

adolescents

disk jockeys

stockbrokers

air traffic controllers

women

linguists

priests

How useful is the concept of 'speech community' in cases such as these?

Intersecting Communities

- When we say “New York English,” what are we talking about?
- The English spoken by a rich white man in Manhattan is different than the English spoken by a working-class Central American immigrant to Staten Island or the English spoken by a female African American high schooler in Brooklyn.
- Whose do we indicate when we say “New York English”?
- Should we say that these three people are members of different speech communities? What if they talk to each other frequently?



Speech Communities??

- Maybe speech community is too fraught a term, and group may be more neutral.

There is no limit to the ways in which human beings league themselves together for self-identification, security, gain, amusement, worship, or any of the other purposes that are held in common; consequently there is no limit to the number and variety of speech communities that are to be found in a society.

- Others use the term *community of practice*, “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagements in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor.”

Discussion! (p. 128, q. 1)

Try to determine in what respects the following countries are both single speech communities and complexes of intersecting speech communities:

The United States

Singapore

Haiti

Switzerland

Australia

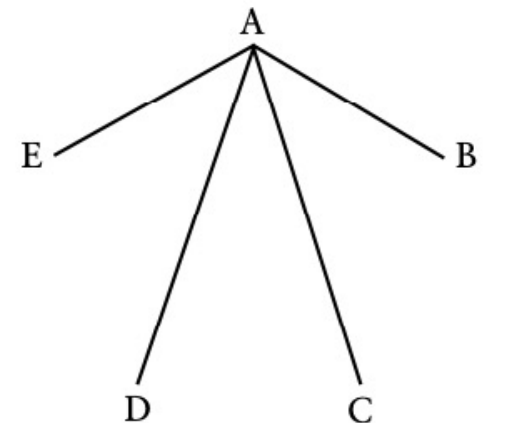
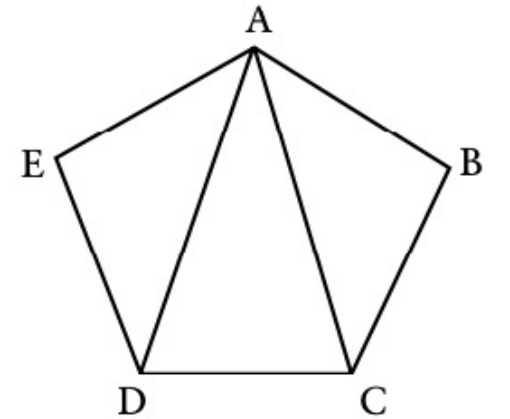
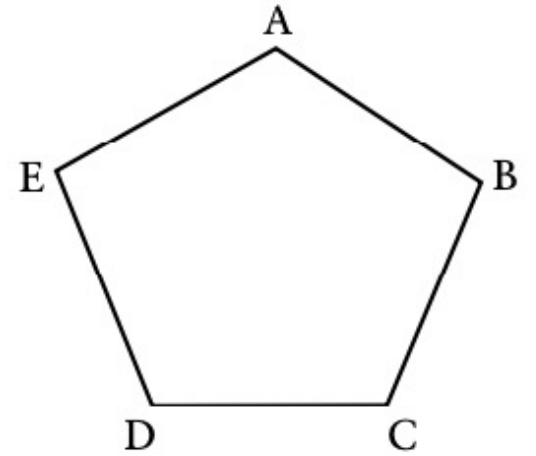
India

The People's Republic of China

Networks

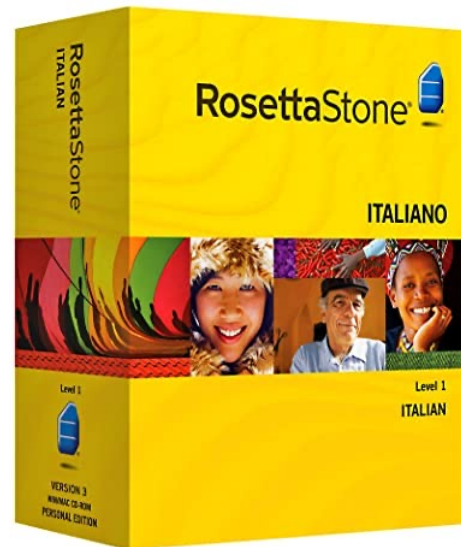
Another way of viewing how an individual relates to other individuals in society is to ask what *networks* he or she participates in. That is, how and on what occasions does a specific individual A interact now with B, then with C, and then again with D?

- A network is something like a web, with each individual person forming a particular node within that web.
- Networks may be *dense* or *loose*.
- In a *dense* network, your connections are also connected with one another.
- In a *loose* network, your connections may not know one another.



Networks

- People acquire language through their social networks.
- Linguistic innovations spread through these networks.
- Networking assumes a reciprocal relationship between the speakers (or nodes). What does this mean?
- What are the strengths and limitations of this assumption?



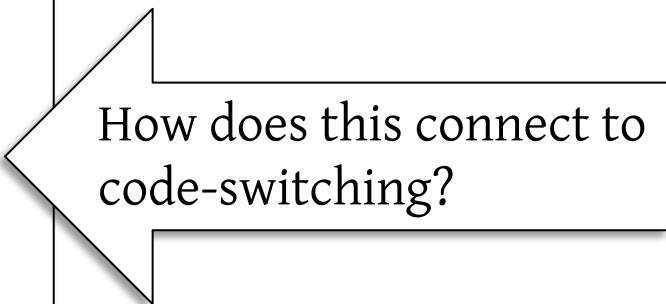
Repertoires

- How do Platt and Platt (1975: 35) define *speech repertoire*?

A speech repertoire is the range of linguistic varieties which the speaker has at [their] disposal and which [they] may appropriately use as a member of [their] speech community.

- Individuals employ their speech repertoires in ways that express who they are.

It can say 'I am like you' or 'I am not like you.' When the speaker also has some kind of range within which to choose, and that choice itself helps to define the occasion, then many different outcomes are possible. A particular choice may say 'I am an X just like you' or it may say 'I am an X but you are a Y.' It may even be possible that a particular choice may say 'Up till now I have been an X but from now on you must regard me as a Y.'



How does this connect to code-switching?

Discussion!

How does your linguistic repertoire differ from that of others in your social network — for example, from your parents or grandparents, your best friend or significant other, or from your professors?

Remember!

- Your midterm is due by 11:59pm tonight.
- For our next class (9 April) please read pp.135–145 in the textbook.
- Have a fabulous spring break!